

THE MEANINGS OF PROPENSITY: PERSPECTIVES FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Michael J Wilson
Susan Berkowitz
Westat, Inc.

Jerry Lehnus
Defense Manpower Data Center

19990608 109

Introduction

The Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS) in-depth interviews were conducted to enhance our understanding of enlistment propensity. The in-depth interviews followed a research protocol that asked youth about their post-high school career decisions/intentions, especially as they related to enlistment propensity. Other areas probed by the protocol included current and prior enlistment propensity and reasons for change and the images youth have of military life. The in-depth interviews were conducted in a structured but open-ended manner that allowed youth to "tell their stories" in their own words and at their own pace.

This paper summarizes the results of this study as they relate to enlistment propensity. The title of our paper consciously includes the plural noun "meanings" to emphasize two of our major findings. First, propensity is a dynamic concept constantly changing in response to personal and external conditions. Second, propensity, whether positive or negative, can have very different meanings for different youth. Positive propensity for some youth merely means that they have not yet decided which career path to take, and for other youth, positive propensity indicates an immediate readiness, willingness, and desire to enlist in the military.

Commonly, propensity is interpreted as a measure of a youth's "taste" for military service. As such, propensity is considered a relatively stable construct. This perspective makes problematic the observation that the majority of YATS interviewees eventually enlisting in the military had negative propensity when interviewed. We propose the adoption of more dynamic and multidimensional conceptualization of propensity. A dynamic interpretation of propensity is fully capable of making sense of the "fact" that the majority of enlistees had negative propensity.

This paper begins with a brief overview of the YATS in-depth interview project. Next, we present portraits of youth from each of four propensity groups. In these portraits we provide a feel for the richness of information gained from the in-depth interviews. Once individual portraits are drawn, overall summaries of the four propensity groups are presented. This is followed by an accounting of changes and refinements in the categorization of youth in propensity groups as a result of findings from the in-depth interviews. Finally, this paper ends with reflections on the practical consequences of considering individual propensity a dynamic and multidimensional concept.

YATS In-Depth Interview--Project Overview

A total of 120 in-depth interviews were conducted with 17-21 year-old male YATS respondents. Interviews were conducted over the telephone, and the period of interviewing extended from December 1995 to May 1996. In order to target the "prime military recruiting market," only high school seniors, high school degreed graduates, or youth enrolled in college were placed in the selection pool. Youth were also stratified by race/ethnicity and propensity group in order to assure representation of important groups of youth. Approximately equal numbers of white, black, and Hispanic youth were interviewed.

For participant selection, youth were categorized into four propensity groups based upon YATS interview responses. The groups formed were termed "Joiners," "Non-Joiners," "Shifters," and "Fence-Sitters." Joiners consisted of youth exhibiting positive unaided and aided enlistment propensity. Non-Joiners were youth expressing negative unaided and aided propensity and who said that they had never considered military service. Shifters were defined as youth who reported that they had previously considered enlistment but that their current propensity is consistently negative. Fence-Sitters fell somewhere between Joiners and Non-Joiners. These youth gave positive responses to some propensity questions and negative responses to others. Approximately equal numbers of youth in each propensity group were selected for the in-depth interviews.

The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes and followed a protocol that probed deeply into youth career decisions, the path(s) taken toward decisions, and the reasons for each step in the process. Only highly trained project staff conducted interviews, and they were trained to cover each item on the protocol, allowing youth to

respond in their own individual manner. In this way, youth were given a forum for telling their story. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Joiners, Non-Joiners, Shifters, and Fence-Sitter--Personal Portraits

The raw data for analysis of the in-depth interviews were the interview transcripts. These recount the stories of youth in the midst of deciding what to do next or reflecting upon the recent past. Each of the more than 100 transcripts reveals an individual with personal quirks and circumstances. As an ensemble, however, sifting the transcripts reveals distinct groups of youth experiencing similar struggles and coming to similar conclusions. The four youth profiled next provide introductions to the worlds of Joiners, Non-Joiners, Fence-Sitters, and Shifters.

John -- A Joiner. John is a white 17 year-old high school senior who has very seriously and rationally considered his options following high school. He currently lives with his father and works part-time on a farm in the midwest and previously had dreams of owning and working the family farm. He loves farm work and the sense of accomplishment it provides. He is currently a straight A student but it hasn't always been that way.

Several years ago, his little sister died of cancer at age 8. Among the tragedies that followed was the loss of the family farm. His family had been farmers for generations, and the twin losses caused a considerable strain on the family. His father went to work in a plastics components assembly plant, and John started to get into trouble. He did not get into serious trouble, but he was beginning a downward spiral and not heeding the advice of adults. Four years ago, John went to live with his father (the family is not together). His father "laid down the law," and John responded positively to discipline. His grades improved with his behavior, and John began, at the urging of his father, to consider his future.

All my life I've wanted to be a farmer, but after we lost the farm, I figured there isn't any business in it anymore. There's no way to make a living out of it. I like doing agricultural things, and that way it would keep me around agriculture, working the big tractors all the time. It's something I'm really interested in doing.

Seeing his first dream dissolve before his eyes and regaining direction from his father's discipline, John began to consider his future. His family has a strong military service tradition and conversations with relatives and his father (his father wanted to enlist in the Air Force but was turned down for bad eyesight) led John to consider enlistment as a path to a goal. John wants to work on "big tractors" as a way to stay with farming. He needs technical training. His train of thought was--technical training, military--service, Dad's, the Air Force. Having decided on this course of action, John plans to enter the Air Force and then, after separating, enter vocational school that will make him an agricultural mechanic.

James--A Non-Joiner. James is a 20 year-old black male high school graduate currently attending a local college. He is in his third year at this college and hopes to work as a commercial artist after graduation. James is the first in his family to attend college, and he admits to not handling it well at first.

During high school, James did not take things too seriously and describes himself as a "flake." In his senior year he began working part-time at a government agency. While at the agency he learned of the "Stay in School" program and joined. The program monitors work, school, and study time and has provided a structure for his considerations of the future. It has been his experiences at work, however, that have provided the biggest inspiration for James. When asked about his job and when he started, James replied,

Yeah. I was still in high school. I guess my coworkers were all mostly females. And they just -- I guess they kind of took the initiative to be like mothers to me and direct me and -- no, lead me down a different path, you know. Tell me what to expect, what not to expect, in college. My family never went to college. I'm the first, in my family to go to college... Before I started working at the [agency] I had no intention of ever going to college.

James was actively taken in and supported by coworkers who showed him a direction he had not previously even considered. Although now a college sophomore with 3 years of experience at his job, the last few years have not been easy either in the work place or academically. James admits that when he started working, "I wasn't very consistent on what I was doing. I made a lot of mistakes. I rushed through my assignments, and I made mistakes that I shouldn't have made." With time and the patience of his coworkers, James's performance improved. He got a great boost when he showed initiative and improved a form used in the agency. "... I felt like the document wasn't top class for a division that was supposed to be top class. So I took the initiative to retype the document, front and back, and presented it to my supervisor, and she approved it. ... it made me feel very good, because they actually ended up giving me a reward for -- you know, I didn't do it for the reward. ... And I kept on doing --

taking the initiative to do other things, you know."

He has followed a similar path in his academic work. "When I first started college, I was very, you know -- it was -- I had got off to a slow start. I had started off at like a 2.0 average and then they went lower than that. It went down to a 1.8 average." From there, James saw, and was told, that his future required effort on his part. He took college more seriously and began to steadily improve. At the time of the in-depth interview he was able to say, "... I got my grades today, and I got straight A's. ... My grades have come up tremendously, and I feel great."

James's world was expanded by mentoring. Beginning as a "gofer," James was told there were greater opportunities, and he was rewarded when he went the extra mile. This made all the difference in the world. Circumstances shape perceptions of opportunities.

Peter -- A Shifter. Peter is a 17 year-old white high school senior currently working part-time in a grocery store as a bagger. When originally contacted for the YATS interview, Peter was considering enlisting in the Navy but had not decided his course of action. Consequently, he was classified as a Fence-Sitter. His father, a career Army officer, is generally supportive of Peter's plans whether they include military enlistment or entering college. Peter's mother was an engineer but is now an invalid. Peter hopes eventually to become a mechanical engineer and realizes he must obtain a college education--but money is tight. At the time of the YATS interview Peter was considering enrolling in a small local college, applying for an ROTC scholarship, and enlisting in the Navy.

By the time he was contacted for the in-depth interview, Peter had firmly decided against enlisting in the Navy or applying for an ROTC scholarship. He had become a Shifter due to timing and perceived misrepresentation of enlistment options by a Naval recruiter. Peter was very intrigued by the possibility of entering the Navy's nuclear power program and serving on submarines. He stated that the recruiter assured him entry into the program and that, as a byproduct of the program, he could earn a bachelor's degree in 2 years. Peter related this information to his father, who made inquiries and determined that entry into the nuclear program was neither direct nor possible to guarantee. Feeling he had been lied to, Peter turned his back on enlisting in the Navy.

"... the Navy recruiter, he had a tendency to jelly up things. He told me about the nuclear power program and all that nice stuff you know, it sounded real good. But when my Dad asked around and I got deep, deep into and kind of scraped away the topping, you know, you realize that there is nothing really there--it is just all air."

Peter was also frustrated in his attempts to secure an ROTC scholarship. "The problem was I wanted to wait until I got the [college] acceptance. The problem was that the military's deadlines for ROTC ... didn't really fit in with the deadline for [college] acceptance. And it was too late for me to go into ROTC scholarship program. And so I decided not to go into ROTC..." Peter, unwilling to commit to ROTC at the required time, dropped this option because it was not synchronized with his timetable.

Frustrated in pursuing military enlistment for educational benefits due to bureaucratic (ROTC filing deadlines) and recruiter problems, Peter has decided to attend a local college so that he can live at home (to save money). Enlisting in the Navy is no longer an option.

Robert -- A Fence-Sitter. Roberto is a 19 year-old Hispanic high school graduate currently working for a temporary employment agency. He lives with his father (his parents have been divorced for 13 years) and is seriously considering the options open to him for the future. Cooking is his passion, and he wants to be a chef. He discovered cooking while in high school and considers it a way of expressing himself. "It brings out the good in me. The better part, you know. It really does. It's helped me a lot with a lot of self confidence."

Roberto sees two paths to his goal of becoming a chef, and he expects to take one within the next 6 months. He is considering enlisting in the Marine Corps and entering culinary school in Rhode Island. He is attracted to the elite and disciplined image of the Marine Corps but worries about being involved in a war. He is excited about the possibility of attending culinary school for which he has received a scholarship, but is concerned about moving to Rhode Island (he currently lives in Utah).

"You know, if I took the Marine Corps, then I would go to California instead of the East coast. I would be in San Francisco. And you know, I would still get to go to culinary school, you know, and the good thing about that is that I'd be closer to my family. But the East coast is a better quality school. They both have their ups and downs and it's just you know, kind of looking at them both equally and give them a lot of thought."

Roberto provides a clear statement of aspirations and concerns expressed generally by Hispanic respondents. He

is attracted to the elite and disciplined image of the Marine Corps and the respect that he considers part and parcel of such service. Attracted to service, Roberto, however, is not attracted to war. Striving to improve himself, he is attracted to technical training (culinary school), but Roberto is reluctant to leave family. Family proximity and obligations are major themes of Hispanic respondents.

Joiners, Non-Joiners, Shifters, and Fence-Sitters -- Group Profiles

Portraits of the four youth just presented provide some indication of the concerns and circumstances confronting the decision to enlist in the military. The descriptions below present aggregate summaries of propensity group profiles. These summaries provide demographic descriptions, descriptions of familial military traditions, images of military life held by youth in each of these groups, and evaluations of military recruiters. There are significant differences in the four propensity groups. Further, these summaries present a continuum of propensity measurement. Enlistment propensity does range from youth actively and currently considering enlistment to those seeking other options. But wait 1 week--the deck will be shuffled once again. The middle ground, Shifters and Fence-Sitters, is very volatile.

Joiners. Demographically, Joiners are predominantly from less well-to-do working or lower middle-class homes. They tend, as well, to reside in smaller towns or rural environments. Most of the youth in this category have a familial tradition of military service and/or extensive contact with people serving in the military. Their familiarity with military life, also, is generally greater than that for youth in any of the other propensity groups, although this familiarity does not always prove a positive influence. Some of the descriptions of military life lead to ambivalence about enlisting in the military.

Many of the youth in this group feel they are not college material or that they are not ready for college at this time. Some are not academically inclined, and others believe that they lack the discipline to study and avoid the "party" temptation if they were to go away to school. "Discipline" and "taking orders" form the most central images of military life for Joiners. These images were not necessarily negative. Several youth noted that accepting discipline can serve an important and maturing role in their lives. For many, the military is considered a structured environment that can prepare them for future careers.

The primary motivations for joining the military are to gain access to training and benefits. Training is considered a stepping stone to the future. Some are enlisting expressly to obtain money for education. These youth are either not ready for college at this time or require funds in order to pursue higher education. Relatively few youth mention serving their country as a motivation for enlistment. The few that did were often apologetic and prefaced their remarks with "I'm not all that patriotic, but..." as if embarrassed to admit a larger social or ideological motivation. Most expressed apprehension about war. Combat and the possibility of dying or killing were worrisome, but they generally considered they were entering a peacetime military.

Non-Joiners. Non-Joiners as a group came from all demographic quarters. Family circumstances ranged from relatively poor to very well off. All regions of the country were represented as were rural, urban, and suburban environments. Non-Joiners included a large proportion of youth either in college or college-bound, as well youth not intending to enter college. Especially compared with Joiners, Non-Joiners tended not to have a family tradition of military service or very much contact with persons who are or have served in the military. Where they do have such contact, their interpretations of military life are frequently negative.

College-bound Non-Joiners associate the military with war and restriction of freedom. Military service would limit personal control over their lives and restrict autonomy and initiative. They are not ideologically opposed to the military, it simply is not an active option. Generally, youth in this subgroup were raised in an environment rich in options, and military service was simply never considered seriously.

Circumstances are somewhat different for noncollege Non-Joiners. In many ways, they resemble Joiners in background, socioeconomic status, and concentration in small-town or rural environments. The distinction between Joiners and noncollege Non-Joiners appears to be more one of degree than of kind. The distinctions tend to relate to fortuitous factors such as timing and twists of fate that set them down a path different from Joiners.

Shifters. In comparison to Joiners, Shifters present a more diverse range of social class backgrounds, are from more varied parts of the United States, and come from a broader base of environments--urban and rural as well as small towns. Shifters are fairly evenly distributed across the 17-21 year-old age range, and the majority are college enrolled or bound. Shifters are less likely than Joiners to have a family military tradition or be in contact with persons currently or previously serving in the military.

Shifters, like Non-Joiners, fall into two major subgroups--college and noncollege aspirants. College-oriented

youth at some point seriously considered enlistment as a way of paying for college enrollment. Their evaluations of the military life were largely negative, focusing on this life as too highly ordered and restrictive of personal choice. Noncollege Shifters expressed fewer objections to military life and, indeed, had a much less distinct image of what military life entailed. The focus of these individuals often concentrated on the "results" of military service as revealed by returning veterans. After seeing friends and relatives return from service little improved as people, with marginal career prospects, and reading or hearing about health risks, they believed enlistment was no longer an option.

Regardless of whether or not college was in their future, Shifters demonstrated a consistently negative view toward recruiters. Several reported that false or misleading information, once identified, was the turning point in career decisionmaking. After that point, military enlistment was no longer considered.

Fence-Sitters. Fence-Sitters, like Joiners, come mainly from working and lower middle-class families. They are generally the youngest group among the four discussed here. Many are high school seniors. Although many report either exposure to persons in the military or a family military tradition, the incidence is somewhat lower than that observed for Joiners. Like Joiners, many report a belief that they are not the college type or not ready at this time. While fewer Fence-Sitters are college-oriented than members of the Shifter or Non-Joiner groups, they do appear to have more career options available than Joiners.

Impressions of military life for Fence-Sitters, although a mix of positives and negatives, show the same elements of hard work, discipline, and order as expressed by Joiners. Boot camp is something to be "gotten through" after which military life becomes much like a normal job, only more regulated. Respect, as a consequence of enduring difficulty and performing service, is often cited as a positive consequence of military service.

Similar to Shifters, recruiters are generally viewed with mistrust by Fence-Sitters. Several respondents seriously considering enlistment complained of "pushy, used car salesman" recruiters. Bothered by characteristics of recruiters, Fence-Sitters did report that recruiters were of little consequence in the enlistment decision. This is a generally reported reaction to recruiters. Although many youth complained about recruiters, the majority reported that recruiters did not materially influence the enlistment decision.

Changes and Refinements in the Assignment of Propensity Group -- Lessons Learned

In the process of analyzing the in-depth interviews, slightly more than 40 percent of respondents were reassigned to different propensity groups as a result of information obtained during the in-depth interview. Table 1 presents both the original classifications based on YATS survey information and the reclassification as performed by the in-depth analysis. This table provides counts only and should be read from left to right. For example, a total of 32 in-depth respondents were classified as Fence-Sitters based upon YATS responses. At the time of the in-depth interviews, 11 remained so classified, 1 was reclassified as a Joiner, 11 were reclassified as Shifters, and 9 were reclassified as Non-Joiners.

Table 1. YATS Survey and In-Depth Interview Classification Matrix

In-Depth Classification					
YATS Survey Classification	Joiners	Fence Sitters	Shifters	Non-Joiners	Total
Joiners	13	10	2	4	29
Fence-Sitters	1	11	11	9	32
Shifters	1	2	16	9	28
Non-Joiners	0	2	1	28	31

Respondents were reclassified for two reasons. The primary reason was a change in propensity occurring between the YATS survey and in-depth interviews. Previously, we described such a change for Peter. Peter, at the time of the YATS interview, was still in the process of deciding whether to enlist in the Navy, apply for an ROTC scholarship, or enroll in a local college. By the time of the in-depth interview, Peter had become a Shifter as he had decided to enter college and not the Navy or ROTC.

The second reason for reclassification applied nearly exclusively to Joiners. Reclassification in these cases constituted a refinement in the measurement of enlistment propensity. The definition of a Joiner included individuals with positive aided and unaided propensity. The assumption was that these criteria would isolate only youth seriously considering enlistment. During the in-depth interviews, we discovered that Joiners, indeed, included persons actively considering enlistment but also individuals considering several possible career options. Slightly over one-third of the original Joiners were subsequently reclassified as Fence-Sitters. The lesson learned in this case was to refine the definition of Joiner.

Conclusion -- The Meanings of Propensity

The YATS in-depth interviews have provided clarification regarding the measure of propensity gathered in the annual YATS interview. For individuals, this measure is not particularly stable and is subject to change based upon personal and external circumstances. In the period between the close of annual YATS interviewing and the beginning of in-depth interviewing, a substantial minority of youth changed in their propensity classification. For the individual, propensity is not a stable "taste" for military service but rather a dynamic reaction to current, and expected future, conditions.

In a similar way, the meanings of positive and negative propensity are not fixed. Positive propensity for one youth could indicate an immediate desire to enter his or her service of choice while, for another, positive propensity can mean nothing more significant than considering enlistment as one of several active options.

 [Back to Table of Contents](#)

INTERNET DOCUMENT INFORMATION FORM

A . Report Title: The Meanings Propensity: Perspectives from in-Depth Interviews

B. DATE Report Downloaded From the Internet: 06/07/99

C. Report's Point of Contact: (Name, Organization, Address, Office Symbol, & Ph #): Navy Advancement Center
ATTN: Dr. Grover Diel (850) 452-1615
Pensacola, FL

D. Currently Applicable Classification Level: Unclassified

E. Distribution Statement A: Approved for Public Release

F. The foregoing information was compiled and provided by:
DTIC-OCA, Initials: __VM__ Preparation Date 06/07/99

The foregoing information should exactly correspond to the Title, Report Number, and the Date on the accompanying report document. If there are mismatches, or other questions, contact the above OCA Representative for resolution.